ALONG THE WAY:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF PRINCIPALS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

by

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Abstract

The focus of this research study was to examine the lived experiences and perceptions of principals with mentoring relationships and the influence of these relationships on their values, leader identity development, and preparation for formal leadership. This included reviewing literature in the areas of mentorship, identity development, and leader preparation. A qualitative phenomenology methodology studied the research question of: What are the perceptions and experiences of principals with mentoring relationships in the K – 12 school system and how have these relationships influenced their values and identity development? Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews of four participants. Data analysis included in vivo and values coding. The interpretation of the results arrived at three themes: Mentoring in Place and Space; Trusting Relationships; and Guiding Mentorship. These themes add to the literature a description of what strong mentorship looks like and how influential mentoring connects to servant leadership theory. The findings recognize the diversity of values held by principals and offer support for informal mentorship within K-12 schools. The interconnectedness of mentoring and leading is discussed and has implications for how principals can engage in mentoring relationships.

Keywords: aspiring principal mentorship, mentoring relationships, leader identity, servant leadership theory

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I am grateful to the principals who participated in this study and willingly shared their time, experiences, and wisdom. They each contributed to key findings in this research. I will continue to learn from them in my work of mentoring and leading as I reflect on what they shared with me. The values they each bring to their leadership are gifts to those they serve.

I wish to acknowledge Dr. Awneet Sivia, Dr. Sheryl MacMath, Ian Levings, Alison Davies, and the late Michael Woods for leading me in what has been an extraordinary learning experience. I am grateful to have learned *with* and *from* all the inspiring people in our cohort. This lovely collection of MEd students, staff, and experiences has encouraged my heart and energized my mind.

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Introduction

I am an experienced elementary teacher, a servant mentor, and an inspired teacher leader. Next to educating and guiding children in their learning, I value the mentorship and leadership I have engaged in throughout my teaching years. I have had many positive and influential mentoring relationships, both as a mentee and as a mentor. I believe these relationships have contributed to my ongoing growth as an educator, a mentor, and a leader. Having mentors along the way who believed in me, and nurtured my developing identity, has been instrumental to my interest in formal educational leadership opportunities. I believe many essential values are present in my mentorship and teacher leadership and have learned that my core values are community and authenticity. I admire mentors and leaders who have been distinguished in my experiences who serve with wisdom, humility, and listening leadership. I believe these are hallmarks of successful leaders in the context of schools and school districts today.

Purpose

As an educator interested in pursuing formal leadership roles, I am curious about the experiences of others and how mentorship for teachers along the way to formal educational leadership roles has influenced what they value and how their leader identity has developed. My relationships with mentors have given my career in education momentum and direction towards leadership. I wonder if this is true for others? I believe a sense of belonging, community, and strong relationships are necessary for teaching. I am curious how educators in the role of principal hold on to what they believe to be important about teaching and leading.

The purpose of this qualitative study is not about finding *the* answers. It is to have a deeper understanding of a person and their lived experiences with mentorship and identity development. The findings of this inquiry will likely lead to even more questions. Yet, I hope

that it demonstrates what is significant and influential about mentoring relationships that occur along ones' way to leadership. The study aims to understand the experiences of principals with their mentoring relationships and how they perceive the influence of these relationships. How have their mentoring relationships nurtured their leader identity and prepared them for principalship? What are their attitudes, values, and beliefs about mentorship and leadership?

Context

This phenomenological study is concerned with the lived experiences of principals. According to the British Columbia Principals and Vice Principals Association (BCPVPA, 2021), the central role of a school administrator is to enhance student achievement. The BCPVPA's Code of Professional Practice (2021) highlights eight ways principals and vice-principals can be effective in this role:

- Pursue professional growth and development
- Provide effective instructional leadership
- Develop a school vision
- Interpret and implement curriculum
- Organize and manage school programs and resources effectively
- Establish positive community relations
- Develop positive interpersonal relations
- Create and foster a positive school culture

In this research, I consider how principals prepare for formal leadership in response to the complexity of the role.

I have been involved in teacher leadership from the beginning of my career and assumed that I would want to transition from teaching to leading formally one day. My experiences with

leadership were often inspired and guided by my mentoring relationships. In many ways, I feel ready to act on my aspirations for working as a principal. Yet, I wonder how principals stay true to who they are and what they fundamentally value and believe to be true about teaching, learning, and leading? This research matters to me because I care deeply about being a passionate, authentic, and competent leader who ensures care for all people in the learning community. Student-centered leadership is the work of principals. I believe principals can best improve students' educational experiences by supporting and taking care of the adults who support and take care of the children. Stronger schools can be created by learning how mentorship supports leadership preparation and identity development. I see the route the principal travels to be full of unexpected bumps and adventures, varied landscapes, and sometimes even loneliness while driving the bus. I have questions about how principals are navigating these roads, how mentoring relationships have offered directions, and what principals have learned along the way.

Research Questions

I am approaching my research through the constructivist paradigm (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) to develop a deeper understanding of my guiding inquiry question: What are the perceptions and experiences of principals with mentoring relationships in the K – 12 school system and how have these relationships influenced their values and identity development? The key sub-questions guiding data collection for this research study are: (a) What are the lived experiences of principals with mentoring relationships? (b) How do principals describe their values and identities? (c) What perceptions do principals have of mentoring relationships influencing their values and identities? (d) How have mentoring relationships prepared principals for a role in formal leadership?

I will examine these questions within a qualitative phenomenological study. As phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018) is concerned with the lived experiences of a smaller sample of participants, this type of inquiry is best suited to exploring four principals' experiences with mentoring relationships and identity development.

Scholarly Significance

This research is significant because mentorship and leadership, particularly in K – 12 education settings, have been underexplored (Crippen & Wallin, 2008; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The literature offers a broader array of research findings and resources when looking at mentoring relationships in business, nursing, and graduate school. K – 12 schools are unique environments and therefore require study in these settings. Additionally, the concept of identity and its importance is popular in both mainstream and educational culture and warrants more rigorous investigation.

The importance of this research is in how it will answer questions about mentoring relationships that support teacher leaders, aspiring principals, and principals in the role. I examine principals' perspectives to discover how leader identities are influenced and developed through mentorship. This study can guide approaches for including strong mentoring relationships in leadership preparation programs. It offers valuable insight into the functions of mentorship and leadership and how they connect and co-exist.

School communities and mentorship programs benefit from participants sharing their lived experiences. Insights and understandings emerge about mentoring relationships and identity development for teachers interested in leadership and leaders in the role. This research will benefit the research community in adding to the existing research in mentorship, leadership, and identity development.

Literature Review

The positive influence of mentorship on professionals as they prepare for new roles has been widely documented and is also true in educational settings (Daloz, 1999; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2000; Palmer, 1998; Clayton et al., 2013). A ‘mentor’ is one who “shares their wisdom, experience, and expertise” with others, and the person they are mentoring is a ‘mentee’ (Sharpe & Nishimura, 2017, p. 3). Research in formal and informal mentorship, mentoring relationships, mentor characteristics, leadership preparation, and leader identity development examined aspiring and new leaders' experiences with mentorship (E.g., Parfitt & Rose, 2020; Clayton et al., 2013; Crippen & Wallin, 2008). Most of the research examined in these areas was qualitative: interviews, narratives, case studies, and open question surveys (E.g., Crippen & Wallin, 2008; Carver, 2016; Bertrand et al., 2018). Ideas drawn from a review of this literature included: benefits of mentorship, types of mentorship, quality of mentoring relationships, characteristics of *good* mentors, and emerging leader identity.

Benefits of Mentorship

The first idea to emerge from the literature includes the benefits of mentorship: reflection, learning, and connection. Mentors can have a powerful impact on mentees' awakening and deep learning about who they are (Palmer, 1998). Personal and professional mentors can have positive and long-lasting impacts, such as helping mentees learn to be reflective practitioners and critical thinkers (Crippen & Wallin, 2008). Mentors and mentees benefit from a relationship that provides opportunities to share, reflect, and participate in professional learning together (Ehrich et al., 2004). A benefit for mentees is learning from mentors about how to adapt to the expectations of their new leadership position (Clayton et al., 2013). The purpose of mentorship in leadership preparation is for an experienced leader and a new leader to collaborate to

ultimately promote student achievement (Daresh, 2004). Although mentoring is one of the more effective ways to enhance leadership, what *good* mentoring looks like is less prevalent (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Mentorship includes reflection, connection, and learning as benefits for both mentor and mentee, and different types of mentorship are available for aspiring formal leaders.

Types of Mentorship

The second idea to emerge from the literature involved types of mentorship. Formal and informal mentorship are two types of mentoring prevalent in the literature. Formal mentorship brings mentors and mentees together, typically for mentee learning and support in relationships where the organization establishes the mentor-mentee pairing and the responsibilities of their roles (Mentoring Complete, 2019; Parfitt & Rose, 2020). Informal mentorship is a relationship between individuals who mutually decide to work together to learn from the other and learn together (James et al., 2015). Informal mentorship has little structure and specified goals. Mentor and mentees choose each other based on compatibility, and informal relationships often result in long-term mentoring (Mentoring Complete, 2019). Both types of mentoring relationships are recommended for those aspiring and preparing for formal leadership roles (Zepeda et al., 2012).

Formal Mentorship

Formal mentorship has many benefits for preparing aspiring and new principals. There has been an increase in formal district mentoring programs as leadership preparation programs have become more popular (Skinner, 2009). The Great Lakes Teacher Leadership Academy (Carver, 2016) and The Administrator Mentor Project (Bertrand et al., 2018) are intensive, two-year programs that support formal mentorship designed to prepare leaders to positively impact student achievement. Participants described their experience in preparation programs as

transformational (Carver, 2016), and a priority of these was building tailored and trusting relationships (Bertrand et al., 2018). There were high expectations for mentors in these formal leadership preparation programs. Expectations included: guiding and coaching, reflective questioning, focusing on competencies, balancing challenge and support, and encouraging problem-solving (Bertrand et al., 2018). There is a concern for formal mentorship when the mentor is also serving in a supervisory role to the mentee. Specifically, these roles may act as barriers to mentors building an emotionally connected relationship with mentees (Collins-Camargo & Kelly, 2007). Formal mentorship has benefits and prepares principals when programs are well-designed, prioritize trusting relationships, and encourage reflection.

Informal Mentorship

Informal mentorship offers many benefits not found in formal mentorship. The relationships formed between a mentor and mentee in informal mentorships are strong because they develop from a shared connection. “The most valuable relationships almost always occur when an intrinsic connection is made on a personal, rather than a formally imposed, level” (Crippen & Wallin, 2008, p. 563). Informal mentoring is significant in preparing for leadership and allows mentees to choose their mentors based on the skillset they feel needs developing (Parfitt & Rose, 2020). "You have to go out and search for people who are willing to invest in you and help build you to be what you need to be" (Parfitt, 2017, p. 106). As a result, program and school district leaders encourage individuals aspiring to formal leadership to look for informal mentoring opportunities as part of their preparation (Bengtson et al., 2013). Furthermore, essential factors of informal mentorships are convenient interactions and a high degree of comfort and trust for the mentee and mentor in the relationship (Parfitt, 2017; Scott,

2010). The possibilities of choice, developing trust, and mutual learning in informal mentorship suggest the relationship qualities aspiring leaders require to be successful.

Quality of the Mentoring Relationship

The third idea to emerge from the research centered on attributes of effective mentoring relationships: they were created with consideration to appropriate pairing, founded on trust, and included facets of strength.

Mentor-Mentee Pairing

A prevalent theme in the literature is the mentor-mentee pairing as crucial to a successful mentoring relationship (Bertrand et al., 2018; Clayton et al., 2013; Scott, 2010; Simon et al., 2019). Palmer (1998) writes, “Mentoring is a mutuality that requires more than meeting the right teacher: the teacher must meet the right student” (p. 21). Mentees appreciated when those responsible for the matching process of mentors and mentees paid careful attention to communication styles, responsibilities of positions, and previous experiences with mentoring (Clayton et al., 2013). Brown (2010) found strength in relationships comes from connection defined as, “the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued: when they can give and receive without judgment” (p. 19). Pairing mentees with mentors from outside their district provided an outside perspective when problem-solving and allowed mentees to be free from supervisory pressure (Bertrand et al., 2018). Similarly, it is important to carefully match mentors with mentees. Some mentees perceived their mentor to be unapproachable and felt their requests for support were a burden to their mentor (Scott, 2010). The process of selecting mentors in leadership preparation is an important consideration. There is a concern when it leads to maintaining and reinforcing the status quo, mainly through the practice of excluding potential mentors who may be under-represented in leadership (Sherman, 2005).

Focusing on personalities, styles, needs, benefits, and implications is significant in mentor-mentee pairing to develop a strong mentoring relationship.

Trust and Strength

Trust and strength define the quality of the mentoring relationship in the literature. Trust in mentoring relationships is a necessary foundation for a mentor and mentee to successfully work together and was the number one expectation in the formal mentorship programs examined (Bertrand et al., 2018; Parfitt and Rose, 2020; Scott, 2010; & Ragins, 2016). A trusting relationship included vulnerability and one where the mentee perceived the mentor as benevolent, open, reliable, honest, and competent (Bertrand et al., 2018). Trust between a mentor and mentee was the most prevalent source of strength found in mentoring relationships.

Mentorships support the kinds of strong relationships that are critical to professional cultures in schools (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2000; Crippen, 2004). Strong relationships are characterized as those that emphasize collaboration and shared leadership and improve teaching, learning, and caring (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2000; Crippen, 2004; Simons, 2020). In addition, opportunities for reflection and feedback, a focus on personal and collective growth, and a spirit of flexibility and adaptability all contributed to a strong mentoring relationship (Bertrand et al., 2018; Donaldson, 2009; Lester et al., 2011; Simons, 2020; Zepeda, 2012). Meaningful mentorships were perceived when mentees believed that their mentors were critical friends who had genuine care for their "professional growth and personal well-being" and were confident in their abilities (Malen & Brown, 2020, p. 491). Empowerment and believing in mentees added strength to mentoring relationships and gave the mentoring process a humanizing quality (Hansman, 2012; Malen & Brown, 2020). Aspiring leaders who entered mentorship relationships with pre-existing confidence perceived their relationship to be less close than those who were

building confidence (Scott, 2010). Regardless of the mentorship function, the quality of the relationship contributed to higher self-efficacy amongst aspiring and new leaders (Chopin, 2013). A highly effective mentoring relationship prepares principals for leadership where trust and strength from empowering mentors are present.

Characteristics of *Good* Mentors

The fourth idea revealed from a review of the literature highlighted characteristics that describe a *good* mentor or *good* mentorship and distinguished the more effective qualities of the mentoring relationship. A *good* mentor had integrity, respect for the mentee, a curious and open-minded stance, and a high level of knowledge and experience (Simon et al., 2019; Ragins, 2016). *Good* mentors were characterized as honest, caring, fair, passionate, approachable, and flexible (Simon et al., 2019; Ragins, 2016). *Good* mentorship included: the mentor having prior experience in mentoring, proximity and regular contact with mentors, opportunities to engage in collaboration and reflection in setting goals, and a trusting relationship (Bertrand et al., 2018). A *good* mentor can elevate the quality of a mentoring relationship.

Several studies examined the characteristics of *good* mentorship in connection to servant leadership theory and mentoring experiences of superintendents. Crippen and Wallin (2008) looked at the ten characteristics used to define servant leadership and how these desired traits developed in leaders through mentoring. The superintendents in this study indicated the servant leadership characteristics of the mentors they admired and reported using these same traits in their leadership style (Crippen & Wallin, 2008). Leaders in this study believed that mentors could include "all *teachers* in our lives from whom we learn the truths that most impact our lives and shape whom it is we become" (Crippen & Wallin, 2008, p. 547). *Good* mentors have the

characteristics of servant leadership, and their mentees admire these traits in effective mentoring relationships.

Emerging Leader Identity

The fifth idea to prevail in the literature was related to an emerging leader identity in aspiring leaders' preparation for formal leadership. Aspiring leaders or principals new to positions had a vague or non-existent professional leadership identity. Moving from a teacher identity to a leader identity was crucial for preparing for leadership (Carver, 2016; Jerdborg, 2020). This transformation takes time, support, and understanding of the process. (Carver, 2016; Jerdborg, 2020). "Understanding how principals form their professional identity is essential for understanding how principals make sense of their education and their work practices" (Jerdborg, 2020, p. 2). The transition from a teacher identity to a leader identity came with building on and enhancing their current identity as they developed and practiced their new leadership skills over time (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010; Chval et al., 2010). Reflection is critical in the work of transforming and adopting a new professional identity (Simons et al., 2019). An emerging leader identity is essential for aspiring principals and forms through reflection, support, and existing teacher identity.

Emerging leader identity develops in teacher leadership programs. Four questions support the development of a leader identity: "Who am I? Where am I? How do I lead? What can I do?" (Carver, 2016, p. 163). One way to construct identity is by building and maintaining professional relationships and engaging in learning communities with colleagues (Lammert et al., 2020). An emerging leader identity can be supported formally in leadership preparation programs and informally in relationships and learning communities.

Summary of Key Findings from the Literature

Mentorship influences leadership preparation and has many benefits. Informal mentorships can support strong and trusting relationships, which are the basis of a successful mentoring relationship. As such, more formal mentorships should be structured in consideration of mentor-mentee pairings so more will benefit from *good* mentors who are trusting, flexible, approachable, honest, and experienced. Developing professional identity through reflection and observation is essential when transitioning from teacher identity to leader identity. However, there is more to be learned about how mentors engage mentees in identity development.

Theoretical Framework

Servant leadership theory offers a framework for examining the interconnections between mentorship and leadership. Many theorists have attempted to define servant leadership, and each has offered varying characteristics of a servant leader. The work of Van Dierendonck (2011) offers ways in which this theoretical framework informs this research study on mentoring relationships and identities of principals. Mainly, servant leadership contributes to understanding how, by definition, mentors *are* servant leaders. Furthermore, mentors may become principals who also go on to lead in the style of servant leadership. This section will discuss Greenleaf's (1977) conception of servant leadership theory, leadership as relationship, and how transformative learning theory supports identity development in leadership preparation.

Servant Leadership Theory

Greenleaf (1977) describes servant leadership in his seminal work as:

> It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead … The best test, and difficult to administer is this: Do

> those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants? (p. 7)

Van Dierendonck (2011) writes that the lack of a clear definition of servant leadership has led to many interpretations and, subsequently, a broad list of attributes and behaviours characteristic of servant leaders. However, after a review of servant leadership, Van Dierendonck (2011) found there to be six key characteristics of servant leadership:

1. Empowering and developing people
2. Humility
3. Authenticity
4. Interpersonal Acceptance
5. Providing Direction
6. Stewardship. (p. 1232)

According to Van Dierendonck, servant leadership is unique because these six characteristics are not collectively present in other leadership theories. In addition, the duality of wanting to become a leader with the need to serve and emphasize the personal growth of others distinguishes servant leadership theory from others (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

Reinke (2004) references leadership theory to describe leadership as "a relationship, not a set of attributes or traits" (p. 34). Leadership as relationship is the basis of servant leadership because "community, listening, and empathy" are central (Reinke, 2004, p. 34). Servant leaders are defined by their character and by demonstrating their complete commitment to serving and valuing the uniqueness of others in their learning organizations (Parris & Peachey, 2012; Van Dierendonck, 2018).

Transformative Learning Theory suggests that a shift in perspective initiates deep and self-directed learning in adults (Carver, 2016). Illeris (2014) connected transformation to identity. The relationship between the valued identities of mentors with new leaders' emerging identities can be explored through the transformative learning framework. Furthermore, mentors' and leaders' values and beliefs, which compose their emerging identities, can then be explored through servant leadership theory as they critically examine what it is they believe and value and begin to develop new understandings about themselves as leaders. However, there is a gap concerning the application of this literature, which is how servant leadership, identity, and mentorship are present in K-12 schools with teachers and principals. This framework will shed light on how mentorship, servant leadership, and developing a leader identity are interconnected.

Methodology

This study was conducted to address the following research question: What are the perceptions and lived experiences of school principals with mentoring relationships and how have these relationships influenced values and identity development? This study is informed by my ontological belief that our experiences and how we interpret them relate to contextual factors that lead to multiple, socially constructed realities. This ontological positioning has affected the design of this research study, from the topic of inquiry to how participants' lived experiences have been interpreted (Pitard, 2017). I used participants' words to describe their experiences and perceptions with the phenomenon of mentoring relationships and identity development (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Epistemology, the study of knowledge and what counts as knowledge, create understandings from subjective experiences (Held, 2019). This research is socially constructed knowledge from the participants' lived experiences and the dialogue we shared (Snape & Spencer, 2003). The relationship between the participant and the researcher is intricately

connected (Yilmaz, 2003). The relationship between researcher and participants is that of a closer, collaborative, and informal relationship. Trust in relationships is foundational to vulnerability and openness in communication and is needed to construct a deeper understanding of experiences. Participants' subjectivity, perceptions, and thought processes construct the knowledge of this inquiry.

The axiology of the constructivist worldview assumes values are present and that I, as the researcher, will have biases to include and explain. I suspended my biases, so the participants' voices in this inquiry formed the evidence gathered. I believe the quality of my mentoring relationships has contributed to my identity as an educator and my emerging leader identity. Acknowledging this bias allowed me to see these as my subjective experiences and to know participants have other realities to add to this phenomenon. Investigating my biases allowed room for a deeper understanding of my inquiry for new and different findings to emerge.

What matters most in this research study is the detailed descriptions of the participants' lived experiences and their perceptions of these experiences related to the phenomenon in question. The methodology that is best suited to this inquiry is a qualitative process of research. Yilmaz (2013) defines qualitative research as an "emergent, inductive, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural settings in order to reveal in descriptive terms the meanings that people attach to their experience of the world" (p. 312). This naturalistic approach to this study best captures the essence of participants' experiences.

Method

The method I used within a qualitative methodology was phenomenology. Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences: feelings, emotions, viewpoints, and

perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). van Manen (2014) describes phenomenology as beginning with a sense of wonder about the *what* and *how* of experiences. A phenomenological study describes commonalities of meaning of individuals' lived experiences with a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), key features of phenomenology include:

- emphasis on a deeper understanding and common meaning of a phenomenon
- exploring a phenomenon that all participants have experienced
- discussion regarding participants having both subjective experiences of the phenomenon and objective experiences of the common meanings unearthed in the study
- bracketing of the researcher to identify and set aside personal experiences with the research, allowing focus on the participants' experiences
- data collection that most often involves interviewing individuals
- data analysis that moves from narrow to broader units of meaning
- describes the "essence" of experience.

van Manen (1990) defines this essence as a “grasp of the very nature of the thing (phenomenon)” (p.177). Phenomenology is the method best suited to constructing a deep understanding of participants’ lived experiences by capturing the essence of what has been experienced.

Phenomenology was selected because it reflected the wonderings I had about others’ experiences with mentoring, developing identity and preparation for leadership roles. I wanted to understand the essence of the participants' experiences and their mentoring relationships that may have influenced their identity development (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I was interested in subjective and multiple realities of mentoring relationships and identity development and finding out what was common amongst these experiences. Finding commonalities came from analyzing

the participants' thick descriptions of experiences, a trait of strong phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Bracketing

I ensured validity in this study by bracketing during the interview dialogue. In bracketing, I put my assumptions aside and remained as neutral as possible when interacting with the participants. My experiences with mentoring, both as a mentee and a mentor, have been positive, pivotal, and transformational. I have a lasting relationship with my first mentor in education from 20 years ago. The impact of our relationship in my beginning years as a teacher influenced my early teacher identity. Endless reflection and connection with my mentor continue to shape my emerging leader identity. I had assumptions that strong mentorship influenced my growth as an educator. I assumed that I valued those identity traits in myself and others because I saw my mentor as wise and humble. I also have experienced success in my role as a mentor with beginning teachers. Upon reflection, I entered mentoring relationships with the memories of my experiences and with the intent to foster growth in educators by focusing on the quality of a trusting and connected relationship. My identity as a teacher, mentor, and leader connects to the practice of listening leadership (Safir, 2017) and reflects my value for community, authenticity, wisdom, and humility (Brown, 2018). My understanding of how my values and identity have developed resulted from many life experiences. Yet, I credit a positive and connected mentoring relationship early in my career for influencing how I teach, mentor, and lead today.

Managing Bias. To check my bias, I maintained a double-entry journal. I recorded biases and assumptions that surfaced throughout data collection and data analyses. I made sure my intentions were clear in my letter of informed consent, letter to participate, and opening conversation about what I am studying (Miles et al., 2014). I further managed bias by checking

the meaning of outliers and extreme cases and discussed the exceptions to the themes generated through my analysis. Additionally, the participants' member checks of the transcripts further managed bias, and a supervisory committee checked the interpretation of codes and themes (Miles et al., 2014).

Strength of Study. I used the triple crisis of representation, legitimization, and praxis to ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of this research study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

- Crisis of representation: I accurately represented participants' voices by spending virtual time together to get a deeper sense of who they were. Participants provided thick descriptions by sharing their definition of a key term explored: mentorship. I personalized the participants in my description.
- Crisis of legitimization: The trustworthiness and believability of this research were strengthened with direct quotes that exemplified meaning. The interview protocol is included in Appendix B.
- Crisis of praxis: The results of this research will impact my mentoring relationships and the development of my emerging leader identity. Further, the responses and findings to the questions asked in the interview protocol may influence mentorship programs and teacher leadership programs.

I represented participants' voices, used direct quotes to demonstrate trust, and attended to how the findings may strengthen the authenticity and trustworthiness of this research study.

Data Sources

Data sources were based on the four participants in this research study. Three of the participants are currently working as school-based principals, and one is working as a district principal. Their combined experience included vice-principal, principal, and district principal in

elementary, middle, and high schools, within and outside the local school district. The years of experience in a vice-principal or principal role for these participants ranged from 4 – 11 years.

The principal participants in this research study work for an urban public school district in western British Columbia. There are approximately 50 schools employing principals and vice-principals in this district and those working in district program positions. The school district has offered formal mentorship opportunities to teachers for many years and provides mentorship and coaching for administrators. They also offer participation in a two-year Teacher Leader Academy where selection is granted based on both application and reference. In addition, the British Columbia Principals and Vice-Principals Association (BCPVPA, 2020) offers mentorship opportunities for principals and vice-principals in the province. The principals and vice-principals in this district have recently participated in professional development learning around values and identity development (Brown, 2018) and listening leadership (Safir, 2017).

This research study took place in the time of COVD-19, a worldwide pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). There were implications for data gathering when researching during COVID-19. Semi-structured interviews were virtual because of provincial health orders and workplace safety plans from the Government of British Columbia (2020) to avoid unnecessary physical gatherings. Conducting the interviews virtually did not seem to inhibit responses from participants. However, it is possible that responses were not as in-depth as they may have been in person, given more limited opportunities to establish personal connections in the online environment.

The local school district and the University of the Fraser Valley's Human Research Ethics Board granted consent to conduct this research (HREB Protocol No. 100570, Appendix A) before recruiting participants for this study. Participants were selected using purposeful

convenient sampling because it allowed the intentional selection of participants, who then provided descriptions of their experiences that best addressed the phenomenon studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The following criteria were used to select participants: (a) employed as an elementary principal or elementary vice-principal; and (b) having had experience with mentoring relationships.

Four principals/vice-principals from a list of potential participants were invited through email to participate in an interview about their mentoring relationships and identity development experiences. The potential list of participants was created in case the initially invited principals declined the invitation to participate. I contacted the individual participants who accepted the invitation to participate through email to schedule a mutually convenient virtual interview using Zoom conferencing technology. I planned for the interview to be a maximum of one hour in length. I shared the letter of informed consent and the interview questions (Appendix B) once I had confirmed the dates and times of the interviews with the participants. At the beginning of our meeting for the interview, I reviewed the informed consent letter with participants. They returned the signed consent via email, signaling their acceptance to participate. At this time, we discussed confidentiality and their anonymity in the study. Gender-neutral pseudonyms were assigned to each participant when I anonymized the transcripts. The pseudonyms for participants in this study were: “Parker,” “Rowan,” “Wylde,” and “Avery.”

Data Tools

A semi-structured interview protocol (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) of seven open-ended questions was the tool for this phenomenological study because it allowed participants to use their own words to describe their experiences (Appendix B). A bracketed interview of open-ended questions invited dialogue and thick descriptions of experiences to be shared by the

participants. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) suggest that meaning is constructed in the social interaction between the researcher and participant through attempts to uncover the participants' lived experiences. For example, I had participants define mentorship in their own words, asking, “What does mentorship mean to you?” I prepared extending questions to include in the interview if needed. Examples of these extenders included: “I am curious why you said ---. Please give an example.”; and “Tell me more about --.” During the interview, I was mindful of allowing the participants to do the talking as they described their experiences and provided examples. I consciously kept interjections to a minimum and used non-verbal communication to demonstrate listening and encouragement.

The conversations were digitally audio-recorded using my personal cell phone and Otter voice transcription. I created and downloaded the transcription after conducting the interviews. I checked the transcription for accuracy before deleting the audio recording from Otter and anonymized the transcript, assigning a pseudonym to each participant. I further maintained confidentiality by including systems for collecting and storing interview transcripts.

I shared the individual transcriptions with the participants and had them verify that my construction of their feelings, thoughts, and perceptions was accurate. These member checks (Creswell & Poth, 2018) were completed within three days of the interview. I encouraged participants to read through the transcript and add, remove, and edit as they liked so the transcriptions would reflect their experiences and perceptions. I let them know that if they wished to add something to the transcript that they had not included in the initial interview, they were welcome. I requested that they return transcripts within five days of receiving them. This was communicated and considered to be the final date to withdraw from the study. Return of the member check indicated the participants’ approval and acceptance of the transcription and

allowed data analysis of the transcripts to proceed. I communicated that the transcript would be accepted and considered ready for analysis if not returned within the given time frame.

Data Analyses

It is possible in a phenomenological research study to begin data analysis before all the data is gathered (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition to the above use, I kept a double-entry research journal to record observations, notes, assumptions, wonderings, and questions as I interviewed, reflected, and interacted with the transcriptions. I made a note if early analysis of one transcript impacted later analysis of other transcripts.

After data collection was complete, the data was organized and prepared for analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This included anonymizing member-checked transcripts. I created a spreadsheet using Excel in which to record codes, themes, and quotes. Creswell & Poth (2018) highlight the overwhelming volumes of data generated in qualitative research and how preparing for analysis by having organizing systems in place early on is imperative to the process.

I read and re-read the transcripts to get a firm understanding and connection to what each participant experienced and how they perceived their experiences. Saldaña (2011) describes this familiarity with participants' words as "data intimacy" (p. 95). I planned to construct meaning from multiple experiences. I wanted to first get a feeling for the entirety of the data before narrowing my focus to the words and phrases that would lead to new understandings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As a constructivist, I analyzed the evidence using coding and transcript analysis to build upon participants' views. I then created themes that generated new theories about this phenomenon. I described, classified, and interpreted the data using the process of coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Saldaña (2011) defines codes as "a word or short phrase that

symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 95-96). The coding process I used included first-level coding, where I worked with the data to create codes, and second-level coding, where I worked with these codes to form categories and themes. The categories and themes formed in second-level coding were extended phrases that summarized both apparent and underlying meanings (Saldaña, 2011).

I referred to notes made in earlier readings as I read through the transcripts. I first coded by highlighting units of meaning that stood out or emerged in more than one place. I used two types of first-level coding in my analysis. I used in vivo coding, which uses actual language spoken by the participant as the codes (Saldaña, 2011). This involved highlighting words or short phrases that stood out as "significant or summative" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 99). In vivo codes were inputted into Excel, including the page number, interview question number, and participant number. I then used values coding as a second first-level coding system to analyze the data (Saldaña, 2011). Values coding identifies "values, attitudes, and beliefs of a participant, as shared by the individual and/or interpreted by the analyst" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 105). This type of coding aligned with my research question because I wanted to understand my participants' values. I was interested in the "heart and mind" of the phenomenon of mentoring relationships and identity development (Saldaña, 2011, p. 105). Values coding consists of: (a) values: people, things, or ideas that we attribute importance; (b) attitudes: evaluative thoughts and feelings about ourselves, other people, things, or ideas; and (c) beliefs: true or necessary thoughts, feelings and perceptions that formed from "personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals…" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 105). Values coding was selected because it had a high likelihood of producing rich data within the study of phenomenology (Saldaña, 2011). I attached a value,

attitude, or belief code to each in vivo code. I categorized all the value codes together, the attitude codes, and the belief codes (Saldaña, 2011).

The next step in data analysis consisted of second-level values coding: classifying codes into categories and emerging themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To do this, I looked to each in vivo code with a values code attached and named it with either a word or a short phrase. I then created and named categories that acted as an umbrella for similar and related codes. Finally, these categories were then sorted and arranged to form prominent themes found in this study. "Themes are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 194). Five to seven general themes are a typical number of themes to emerge from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Four general themes emerged in my analyses. I included powerful quotes from the transcription that illustrated each code, category, and theme. I recorded quotes that captured the essence of a theme into the excel spreadsheet. The themes were categorized into similar clusters to generate theoretical constructs (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Results

Emerging from this process were three themes that embrace what mattered most to principals in this study of their lived experiences with mentoring and identity: Mentoring in Place and Space, Trusting Relationships, and Guiding Mentorship.

Mentoring in Place and Space

Mentoring happened organically in place as a physical location and as a mentee's place of understanding. Mentoring in space occurred in the context of relationships. Principals experienced mentorship with colleagues as mentors and multiple mentorships throughout their careers. Mentoring relationships thrived in spaces of quality relationships, and key features made

the building of relationships for mentoring more likely. These relationships served as spaces for mentees to feel seen.

Colleagues as Mentors

Having colleagues as mentors was unanimously shared by participants. The place of living, learning, teaching, or leading was critical in determining mentoring relationships with colleagues. All participants shared experiences of colleagues perceived to be mentors along their way. Rowan stated, "I've had other colleagues…every role that I've had, I've had someone there beside me." Avery valued being seen as "an equal partner," while Parker appreciated having a collegial mentoring relationship with an "experienced person who has been through it." Participants considered collaboration with colleagues to be mentorship and referenced principals they would meet to "talk about issues and help and support each other" (Avery). Learning from colleagues was valued by participants as they were pursuing formal leadership. Avery remarked, "I learned a lot of what I wanted to do, but [also] what I didn't want to do" (Avery) and appreciated colleagues who were perceived as mentors because they were "going through things at the same time" (Avery). Parker shared, "there are some incredibly talented principals here, and I consider them all mentors." Participants shared common attitudes of positivity and gratitude for mentoring relationships with colleagues.

Participants expressed uncertainty about defining some of their relationships with colleagues as mentorships because they were not formal. Rowan stated, "[they're] not intentionally mentoring me, but [they] kind of [are]" when talking of a colleague who acted as an informal mentor. Wylde reflected on an experience that helped prepare them for leadership, "You get into education where teachers are leaders anyway, they're leaders of students in their class or leaders within the building, and you watch their leadership style." Participants stressed

the importance of teamwork in collegial mentoring relationships. A mentoring relationship between a principal and vice-principal suggested flattened hierarchy, "I have the principal, but we're a team…we're co-principals" (Parker). Wylde remarked on the mutual benefits that emerged from working as a team with those they lead and mentor, "I rely on them, sometimes as much as they rely on me. We kind of all work together." Learning alongside colleagues and working as a team provided spaces for mentorship to happen.

Multiple Mentorship

Having multiple mentors to guide participants in different places and transitions along their way was consistent across all participants' experiences. Participants conveyed a positive attitude when speaking about the collective of "fantastic mentors" they experienced (Rowan). Avery shared, "As a new administrator, I had mentors, and they were awesome." They valued the benefit of having diverse and multiple mentors, "they all have their strengths" (Avery). Participants reflected on early life experiences when considering who their mentors were. Ongoing and significant mentorships included relationships with family, community members, and colleagues who felt like family. Rowan shared, "my parents were my first mentors," and placed importance on a mentoring relationship with a teacher from high school, "[they were] like a second father to me." Wylde felt similar, "[They're] really a mentor to me. [They] basically calls me [they're] other [child]." Multiple mentorships offered the possibility of finding significant and long-lasting mentoring relationships.

As participants talked more deeply about noteworthy experiences with mentoring relationships, they connected to people they had not initially considered a mentor. Avery shared, "As I was going on in my career, I had a VP who started acting a little bit more like a mentor and an encourager, and that's why I got into admin." Significant to more than one participant was that

some mentors were unaware they were in a mentoring role. Parker stated, "[They] didn't know they were my mentor," and Rowan, "They would guide me along, whether they knew it or not, just by being around them.” Mentorship was found to form even in unlikely relationships.

Participants referenced intentional reflection on relationships when describing how they learn from past mentors and can continue to access mentors' support. Rowan emphasized, "The key is to be reflective about your relationships.” Further, "I understand now how it's so important to be reflective in your practice and in your relationships" (Rowan). This kind of reflection allowed mentors to guide mentees, even when they were not present. Rowan remarked how they would ask themselves, "What would this person do in this situation? And how would they handle this? I would think about being them having this conversation.” Rowan referenced connecting with past mentors when needed, "I look at my long list of all my mentors in the past, and I can tell you that I can phone any one of them at any time and ask for advice or guidance.” Rowan noted that reflecting on negative mentoring experiences is also valuable learning, "All my experiences have shaped my leadership, even the negative ones because they inform you.” Reflecting on relationships and thinking about those who were mentors in hindsight was common amongst participants.

Building Relationships

The place where the mentor and mentee were situated created the space required for building mentoring relationships. “This is where the relationship piece comes in and the mentorship within the school” (Wylde). Informal relationships built on choice, connection, and need created spaces for meaningful mentoring to occur.

Choice. Choice was a requirement for building successful and enduring mentoring relationships. Defining what mentorship means to them, Wylde responded, "You never know

what relationship you forge with folks or who you gravitate to, but those can also be your mentors, but choose them wisely.” Parker stated, "I think they are lifelong if it is a good relationship,” and Wylde spoke of, "Who do you look to, who do you choose?" Once choosing a mentor, Wylde saw the work of relationships to come next, "then you forge these relationships.” Participants shared how lack of choice for a mentee or mentor could have negative consequences. Rowan believed the relationship between a principal and vice-principal to be "a forced relationship because you don't get to choose," and said, "You're thrown into this mentorship role automatically if you're ever a principal, you're mentoring a vice-principal." Although not their experience, Rowan noted, "you don't always get a principal that is going to mentor you. Unfortunately, they don't always have the time, or it's not their priority.” Participants expressed gratitude for principals who were committed to mentoring, "[They] spent three months mentoring me along and showing me the ropes, and I am grateful for the time” (Rowan). Participants expressed attitudes of honour and responsibility as leaders engaging in mentoring work, "for me, I think it's a great honour and privilege…when you're in this position, you're almost obligated to do a really good job of mentoring them along” (Rowan). Participants valued choosing a mentor who met their needs and with whom they had a connection.

Connection. Mentorship was more likely to emerge in spaces where there were mutual feelings of connection and compatibility between mentor and mentee. Rowan shared, "It's very difficult to enter into this reciprocal mentorship relationship without having a connection to people.” Participants valued building relationships with people they "had more in common with (Avery). Participants experienced shifting roles as they navigated their way through transition points in their careers. As Wylde shared, "I never really viewed myself as a mentor, I was always more of the mentee being mentored by somebody else. But now…I guess I've become somewhat

of a mentor to folks.” Wylde talked about the moment they realized they were a mentor, and instead of looking to others for guidance, they found others were, "always looking to me and asking me questions.” Wylde added, "Experience comes through, and people do look to you for some of the answers. It's kind of neat how that evolved over time… and people gravitate your way and ask you how you're doing these things.” Parker noted that when they were a mentee, their mentor "didn't learn anything from me,” but was surprised to discover when they were the mentor that they "learned so much from [the mentee].” Parker believed that a strong connection developed into a mentoring relationship where "we both learned a lot from each other" and "We were just like a married couple.” Mentoring relationships were made stronger from the beginning when mentor and mentee had a connection.

Need. A catalyst for building effective mentoring relationships was a mentee’s need to learn in a particular area and seek a mentor who could support that learning. Wylde explained this as, "pulling strengths and the things that I needed…I'm kind of weaker in this area, who do I connect with?” Avery referenced one's place in their understanding as an important consideration when they needed mentorship, "It depends on where you are in your experiences.” Principals needed mentoring relationships to support them in their work as leaders, "If I didn't have these relationships, it would be challenging” (Rowan). Building relationships with mentors who helped meet the learning needs of mentees was believed to support principals in various places as they learned while in the role.

There was a need to learn how to build relationships in their work as leaders. Participants expressed gratitude and appreciation for learning about the importance and qualities of building relationships in preparation for formal leadership. Avery said, "What I did get from them, which has taken me a long way, was the importance of relationship and relationships with teachers and

families.” Rowan spoke of a mentor "actively building relationships with me [and] for me" and how that shaped their initiation into leadership in the district. "The experiences that I've had working with all these different people helped me create connections with people" (Rowan). Learning how to build relationships was significant to principals because they recognized the importance of relationships in their leadership.

Informal. Informal mentorship was believed to be more influential than formal mentorship. Influence emerged from the connected and enduring nature of informal mentorships as opposed to transitory formal mentorships. As Avery noted, "These are informal mentoring, but at the time my formal mentors had all gone.” In addition, participants spoke positively of informal and formal mentorship and found informal mentoring relationships to offer more profound influence. Avery said, "I really liked them and trusted them [formal mentors], but I had a closer connection to [an informal mentor], and I will still call them, bounce ideas off them, and connect with [them].” Participants expressed admiration, "I wish I could be like her" (Parker), and humility, "[I'm] not necessarily being the expert" (Rowan), when reflecting on influential mentoring relationships. Participants reflected on their informal mentors and noted ones they believed were instrumental in supporting their leadership transition. Rowan shared, "[They] helped pave the way for me to be an administrator," and Parker spoke of an informal mentor as being "the reason I did this.” Participants believed informal mentoring relationships resulted in deep learning prepared them for leadership because they had a feeling of comfort, were based on compatibility, and met a specific need that they desired to develop.

Being Seen

Common to participants' experiences were *being seen* by their mentors. These moments of being acknowledged, recognized, and celebrated by mentors were "just that little thing"

(Parker) that elevated their esteem. Moments of visibility and validation often appeared in the form of compliments from admired mentors. Parker says, "If I could be a piece of the leader that they are…having that compliment from them just meant a lot," and Rowan shared, "[They] felt that I was a good collaborator, and so I think that's a great compliment." These moments of being seen had a lasting impression. Similarly, Parker believed it is essential to celebrate staff, "It just lets the teachers know that you see them because it's hard to acknowledge them individually." Parker spoke of actively "recognizing the incredible skill sets" of their staff and "celebrating the growth." Avery valued giving those they lead "room to shine and to show what they can or want to do." The value placed on *being seen* as a mentee has shown up in the participants' work as mentors and leaders as they acknowledge, recognize, and celebrate the people they mentor and lead.

Being seen sparked leadership aspirations in participants and encouraged moving forward along their career paths. Avery said, "It helped to reignite some of my interest and passion in teaching again and in my own learning." Participants described how their mentor saw qualities in them. This recognition inspired interests in teaching and leading for the participants. Significant to Avery's experience was a mentor seeing Avery's strengths and what they had to offer others. This moment was shared with an attitude of humility and vulnerability:

> What was so different about this was, it was one of the first times, other than my mentor teacher that was across the hall from me my first couple years of teaching…but this person showed an interest, but also showed that they valued what I was doing and that what I was doing in the classroom was of value and was of importance and it was something to be celebrated. And I hadn't really felt that, had that before. (Avery)

Similarly, Wylde valued a mentor noticing them and reaching out with an offer to work together on initiatives and projects, "[They] asked me if we could do this and can I put this together." Avery connected their pivotal experience of being seen to their definition of mentorship, "Working with people who see you as somebody that has things to offer." Being seen, valued, and the feeling that mentees had important things to offer contributed to the strength of the relationship.

Trusting Relationships

Trusting relationships were the most significant feature in mentoring relationships of principals. Being able to *trust in the support* of their mentors was necessary for engaging in opportunities of challenge and risk. Principals valued these opportunities because they led to their professional growth. A mentor believing in the mentee was significant and influential in leadership preparation. Principals appreciated learning *how to be* in their leadership and came out the other side of mentorship with an emerging leader identity and a deeper understanding of who they are.

Trust in the Support

Participants valued the support that comes with a trusting mentoring relationship. Rowan shared that part of mentorship is knowing that mentees can "trust in the support," and Avery said, "It's a trusting relationship where you're supporting each other." Rowan spoke of the need for a mentor to be reliable and dependable in building trust with a mentee. When sharing a story of being in a mentoring role as a district helping teacher, they said:

> Teachers would contact me about everything, and I would go see them as soon as possible, or I would find ways to connect and support them…that's an important piece in

> mentorship as well is building that trust, that 'I'm out of my comfort zone, but I know that I have support, to access that support in a reasonable timeframe. (Rowan)

The word trust often appeared in participants' definitions of mentorship. Avery described mentorship as a "trusting relationship, where we can take risks, where I can be vulnerable…where both people can be vulnerable." Wylde spoke of the presence of trust as necessary for risk and challenge, which ultimately "leads to growth." Rowan shared, "Mentorship is about trust, guidance, and listening." When describing what was noteworthy about influential mentoring relationships, Avery says, "I have to have trust." Knowing that trust was present in their mentoring experiences was described as: feeling like they could "just depend" (Parker) on the mentor, having an "honest relationship" (Parker), and as a place where they "felt safe trying things" (Parker). Parker's comment, "I think it's just all about trust and that relationship," was a common sentiment from participants about their mentoring experiences.

Participants spoke of formal mentorship experiences where trust was lacking, and they no longer considered these to be mentoring relationships. Parker stated, "I've had a mentor where after a few months of working together, I just closed off…I didn't share anything, didn't trust and didn't feel supported." When "that level of trust wasn't completely there," Avery did not feel safe or comfortable in sharing experiences with their mentor or reaching out for support. Trust was perceived as more challenging to build in formal mentorships, "People always worry you are going to report back to somebody" (Avery). Formal mentoring relationships that were with mentors outside of the participants' district were found to be different and "freeing because they didn't have the connections [to people within the district]" (Avery). Trust defines mentorship for principals, and its absence is significant enough to sever the mentorship relationship.

Challenge, Risk, & Growth

Perhaps trust is so important because trusting relationships provided participants safety and support to engage in challenges and risks that resulted in their professional growth. The non-evaluative nature of mentoring relationships and reflective conversations contributed to feelings of safety in taking risks. These relationships allowed participants to "try things out" (Parker). Feeling successful and knowing that support was available to them in challenging situations led to reassurance and confidence for participants "in a safe place where I had support to deal with it" (Avery). Being able to engage in risk was perceived as positive and was a defining component of mentorship. Describing a negative experience where trust was lacking, Parker said, "[I] couldn't take risks because it was all about telling you what to do…they weren't a mentor." Trust, safety, and support allowed principals to engage in opportunities of challenge and risk in the service of learning.

Opportunities to take on a "variety of leadership roles" were common in principals' mentoring relationships (Rowan). Participants noted mentors who practiced distributed leadership and extended invitations to lead in varying capacities as a teacher leader. These mentors were influential in participants' transition from teaching to formal leadership and this mentoring style also supported many other teacher leaders to become principals. As Rowan shared, "[There were] seven teachers who are now administrators who worked with [them] at the school," and "From a mentorship standpoint, I think [they] did a lot to prepare teachers to take on the next role." With increased experience and demonstration of readiness, participants experienced *being seen* when influential mentors "just kept giving me these roles" that opened further possibilities in preparing for leadership (Wylde). Avery saw principals who provided mentorship as allowing for "more distributed leadership" of roles within the school. Avery

further described distributive leadership as an element of leadership preparation and how it "introduced me to some of the pushback you get from colleagues or teachers when you are in a leadership role." Principals appreciated learning through opportunities of risk and challenge opportunities and credit mentors' *seeing them* and inviting them to engage in leadership.

Principals believed engaging in challenges and risks and experiencing failure influenced their leadership preparation. Wylde said, "When there's an open door, just try to go through it…if you fail, you fail." Participants spoke of learning to fail in the safety of trusting mentoring relationships. Parker reflected, "I tried that, and it bombed. I will not do that again." Resilience was evident and resulted from risk and failure. Parker shared, "You can take a risk, it can flop, and you're going to be okay." Avery spoke of being "a strong believer in failing forward," and "You have to have relationships that they know that they can take risks, they can try new things, and they can fail, and it'll be okay." Further, "If you think everything is going to be easy for you all the time, then you're not going to take the risks, and you're not going to work through your struggle, you're not going to be resilient" (Avery). Participants appreciated learning from experiencing failure in safe and trusting relationships.

Risks and challenges in trusting mentoring relationships led to learning and growth in areas of interest and strength for participants. Trying things allowed participants to "see what works" (Avery) and reflect with their mentors about their practice, what was worth adopting, and what to leave behind. Avery found, "It was a really great relationship in that this person was able to challenge and push me and help me grow." These learning experiences were valued because they "allowed me to pursue my passions" (Rowan) and because "you have all these conversations about education which drives passion too" (Wylde). Participants' appreciation and gratitude for

mentors who "put them through the wringer" (Wylde) and guided their learning in risks and challenges were evident.

Avery talked about providing challenge in a mentoring relationship from the view of the mentor. Avery said, "I'm not afraid of the hard questions, and I'm not afraid to push." Avery shared, "learning is a challenge, it's a struggle," and talked of enjoying the conversations where mentees wrestle with a problem and learn from it. They referenced having grace and understanding for where mentees were in their place of understanding and guiding them forward from there:

> This is a hard thing to do at times...just like we want teachers in classrooms to accept where the student is at and work with them from where they're at and celebrate the movement they make, we have to do the same thing with for our colleagues." (Avery)

Rowan adds, "Ultimately we want people to self-actualize and reach their potential." As mentors, principals expressed empathy for mentees and tailored mentorship to a mentees' place of understanding.

Trust was a necessary requirement in mentoring relationships for participants to feel safe enough to experiment with leadership when opportunities were presented to them. Similarly, the feeling of safety was necessary to risk failing in these opportunities. Consequently, participants valued the development in their learning and growth that emerged from leading in challenge and risk.

Believing In

Mentors who demonstrated *believing in* mentees were significant in creating trusting mentorship relationships. Parker said, "I think the biggest thing with mentorship, it has to be someone who believes in you." A mentor believing in Parker was the most noteworthy feature of

their mentoring relationships, "[They] just had so much belief in me and confidence in my abilities.” Avery felt that their mentor *believing in* them elevated their esteem in themselves, "They kind of held you up a bit.” Having someone who believed in them developed confidence in principals and ignited passion for student-centered teaching, leading, and learning. Rowan referenced their mentor believing in their abilities and career possibilities, "[they were] already thinking of my future even before I thought about my future.” Rowan valued this mentor because they "put pieces in place for me to ensure I would have a successful career.” Parker spoke of how *believing in* the possible growth of teachers includes "congratulating [them] on the success I saw" and being sure to share the words, "I knew you could do it.” Parker’s style of mentoring in a leadership role reflects the strengths valued in their past mentors. Parker spoke of a mentor offering grace, "You made the best judgment you could,” and years later offers the same attitude towards others, "Everyone's doing the best they can.” Principals expressed gratitude for their mentors *believing in* their abilities, providing vision for their futures, and facilitating seeing themselves and beginning to identify as leaders.

How to Be

Learning 'how to be' and developing a leader identity was valued in trusting mentoring relationships. The phrase *how to be* was used when connecting values to what participants believe to be true for themselves in their leadership. Learning *how to be* a leader was described by Parker as "really living what you believe in.” Parker spoke of learning "how to handle yourself professionally" and "how to be patient, how to be forgiving to myself and others.” When reflecting on the emergence of their leader identity, Wylde felt validated and affirmed because others recognized that who they were as a person resembled who they were as a leader, "People know who you are. People know what your intentions are.” Rowan spoke of mentorship

as instilling values and “help[ing] me develop to be the person I am.” Principals learned more about themselves and what they value through observing their mentors’ modeling their own values, "[They] just keep modeling it. I learned that from [them]" (Parker). Participants noted learning how to convey care for teachers by doing little things, "[They] would open the doors every day for us and so I do that for the staff here" (Parker). Rowan shared a significant experience of a mentor who taught them *how to be* in relationships when things are difficult:

> [They] helped me understand the role of administrator and how to have difficult conversations with teachers…One thing that stuck with me was sometimes administrators need to be the adults in the relationship. Sometimes with stress and anxiety, things can come out sideways, and people aren't really thinking rationally…you need to step back and look at the situation and be the adult in the relationship, and you have to make the hard decisions and have the hard discussions…that influenced my leadership as well.

Principals' developing leader identity and how they handled difficult decisions and conversations was influenced by knowing how to be. Mentors supported principals in learning *how to be* who they needed to be in these challenging situations.

Guiding Mentorship

The theme of guiding mentorship emerged from participants describing mentors as guides. They held significant value for mentors who acted as guides alongside them. Values that influenced the hearts and minds of principals are described here. Servant leadership as mentorship resulted in The Three Es of Guiding Mentorship: Encourage, enhance, and empower.

Mentor as Guide

Principals described their influential mentors as *guides* and believed strongly in the practice of servant leadership. Principals valued this style in their mentors and their leadership

practices and approached leading with a servant, humble attitude. Rowan described mentorship as “guidance, a guide on your side.” Rowan shared humility, “I'm just providing them with guidance in different areas of leadership.” Avery highlighted servant leadership, “I like to learn alongside people” and to “do it in a way that is guiding.” Rowan spoke of core values, “I came up with reciprocity and the idea that I am always giving back, a servant leader.” Rowan added, "I look at my life and how I benefit from education," and wished to provide that benefit to those they serve as principal. Participants valued guiding mentoring relationships where learning occurred alongside and in the style of servant leadership for the focus on the development of the mentee.

Heart & Mind

Although principals shared some similar values, a diverse collection of equally significant values emerged. A principals' values as a leader were often the result of learning from relationships and experiences with mentors. The participants used their diverse and common values to guide them in leading with their hearts and minds.

For example, Parker spoke of compassion for students, staff, families, and colleagues throughout the interview, “I'm compassionate for staff, supportive to staff, and supportive to kids.” Parker valued being “all about the people,” “having a passionate staff,” and validating their staff, “I love people enjoying what they're doing and celebrating success.” Parker highly valued compassion and support.

Rowan talked about core values to guide them, “It's important to have that core value...having something you value or guide you.” They arrived at one word that captured their leadership style through conversations with a mentor. Rowan's identity has evolved into a core

value of empowerment, “I'm empowering people to be the best they can be, whether a student, teacher or parent.” The value for empowerment wove throughout Rowan’s experiences.

Wylde spoke of three values that “come back to servant leadership” and guide them in leadership: being a moral steward, being a competent administrator, and being student-centered. “If I'm a good moral steward within the buildings, …make sure [I'm] a competent person within that role…and there for the kids.” Wylde believed in positivity and teamwork, “Looking for the positive, that's what I try to instill,” and “If we value everybody equally, it just means we are going to have a good team.” Moral stewardship, competency, and keeping the student at the center of their decisions are the values that construct Wylde’s leader identity.

Avery values trust and challenge in relationships, “You have to have those trusting relationships with your teachers…that they know they can take risks, and they can fail, and it will be okay.” Avery also values curiosity and conversations, “I'm really curious, so I ask a lot of questions.” Avery stressed the value of joy in leading and learning, “I have to have joy in my life and enjoy what I'm doing,” and “Our learning has to be joyful and meaningful and relevant.” Avery’s values for trust, challenge, curiosity, and joy are evident in the mentoring they do in leadership.

All principals valued being a student-centered leader and keeping the student at the heart of all decisions. Wylde expressed this as, “[I'm] relying on a whole bunch of smart people trying to do the right thing for kids.” For Rowan, “it's important to have that core value when it comes to decision making.” Parker spoke of, “I think it goes back to knowing the why,” and Avery keeps the “child at [the] center of everything I do.” The value for the child/student/learner as central to the work of principals was strengthened for leadership through conversations with, and modelling by, their formal and informal mentors.

In mentoring relationships, participants had similar beliefs about the qualities of strong mentorship and leadership. Participants valued clarity, “Things there were clear. I never had to wonder about things” (Parker). Each believed in the merits of listening, “Mentorship is about guidance, trust, listening” (Rowan). Listening and empathy were strongly valued, “someone can at least empathize and listen to you” (Parker); “We listen to our stakeholders, and then we're empathetic, we are compassionate, and then we make decisions" (Rowan); and "It's important to be a good listener, especially in a leadership role" (Rowan). Transparency, openness, and honesty were common values. Avery said, “I try to be as transparent as I can, as open and honest as I can,” and “As long as you're clear and honest about what you're about, and transparent, people can accept that.” Wylde shared, “You're going to make these mistakes, just being honest about it. I think good leaders admit when they're wrong.” While there were no similar core values shared between all participants, there was a shared collection of fundamental values required to be an effective leader. These shared values guided principals in their relationships in mentorship and leadership.

3 Es of Guiding Mentorship

Guiding mentorship emerged from principals' identification with servant leadership and defining mentorship as guidance. Three qualities of guiding mentorship influenced principals' preparation for leadership and identity development: Encouragement, enhancement, and empowerment.

Encouragement. Participants believe encouragement from mentors is critical in a successful mentoring relationship. Along the way, it was mentors who were encouraging that were noteworthy. Encouragement to Avery looked like noticing strengths in mentees and actively supporting their growth, "They were really encouraging... [the mentor said,] you should

be sharing it, you should be talking about it.” Avery values curiosity, and it was mentors who "really helped encourage me to be curious and keep asking questions.”

As mentors and leaders, principals demonstrated encouragement for others with an attitude of grace and acceptance for where people were in their understanding. Avery noted, "We're all at different places with our understanding of different things and our ability to change depending on what's happening in our life." Avery encouraged and supported mentees in their learning, "You're comfortable on that edge there, but you're struggling a bit." Avery added, "There's got to be something that's not going quite the way you want it to go. How can we support you?" Guiding mentorship included encouragement that emerged from seeing and supporting strengths in participants.

Enhancement. Principals described their mentoring role as enhancing mentees' strengths and skillsets. For Rowan, "My goal was to add value to what [they are] doing right now and just enhancing it somehow" and "I would add my expertise and kind of marry it with theirs." Parker believed, "a mentor stretches your thinking" and "makes you think of different ways of doing things." Rowan reflected on their mentors, "looking at them today, they all come with different skills, experiences, added value."

When mentoring, principals had respect for mentees' skills, knowledge, and place of understanding. Rowan believed that:

> Adults come with a lot of experience and prior knowledge, and that needs to be respected...I'm just providing [them] with guidance in different areas of leadership…I'm still respecting [the skills they come with], just adding value to [their] skillset and guiding [them] along.

Rowan believed in their intuition when meeting new people and using it to guide how they will offer support, "In my first meeting with them, I can already see how I can work with them and support them...What their strengths and weaknesses are and help to nurture them."

A challenge with guiding mentees and enhancing their skills is when mentors do not feel equipped to offer support in a particular area. Rowen noted, "There's also the instructional side of things when you're a leader, a principal. You're expected to be an instructional leader and guiding best practice, and that's hard to do when it might not be your subject area" (P2, p. 3). Guiding mentorship included enhancing the skills of participants and honoring their place of understanding from the beginning and throughout the relationship.

Empowerment. Principals valued mentors who empowered them along the way. Connected to strong mentorship for principals was empowerment to make decisions and discover their potential. Parker described empowerment in mentors as those who "bring you to your own conclusion" and "helps you find your own answers." Parker noted that "[mentors] may not have all the answers" and are guiding mentees in self-discovery. Principals valued feeling empowered in mentoring relationships, "it's really looking at yourself, how you can change" (Parker), and that developing identity to prepare for leadership needed to come from within, "from the inside out" (Parker). Empowerment served an important function in mentoring relationships. Specifically, it allowed the mentor to guide, and it deepened the mentees' learning and understanding as they worked to reach their potential.

Participants believed in empowerment and reciprocity with the servant leadership model as a guide in their mentoring and leading experiences. Rowan framed the process of guiding mentees through an empowerment lens, "I am going to empower you with knowledge, and ultimately I am going to walk away" and "It's always the intent that you're going to be self-

sufficient, self-directed, down the road." Empowerment implies that the mentor will not always be needed once the mentee has reached their potential.

Empowerment came in the form of encouraging curiosity by asking the mentee questions that made them think more deeply. Parker spoke of a mentor who fostered independence in decision-making. Instead of telling Parker what to do, the mentor had them talk through how they would address it. Principals referenced empowerment in mentors who influenced their preparation for leadership, "people are guiding me along and empowering me to take on this role" (Rowan). Empowerment resulted in principals learning with instead of from their mentors. It was not about working with a mentor who has all the answers and an attitude of "you're going to learn from me" (Avery).

Principals' leader identities were connected to mentoring and leading in the style of guiding mentorship and servant leadership. Evidence of empowerment, enhancement, and encouragement was significant in the mentoring relationships of principals, both as a mentee and a mentor.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences and perceptions of principals with mentoring relationships. The study aimed to understand how these relationships influenced leader identity and preparation for formal leadership. The guiding research question was: What are the perceptions and experiences of principals with mentoring relationships in the K – 12 school system, and how have these relationships influenced their values and identity development? This question emerged from curiosity about the quality of mentoring relationships that influence leadership and what role mentorship plays in developing values and identity. Having a strong or emerging sense of identity, knowing who you are as a

leader, is supported in the literature as necessary for navigating the difficult conversations and decisions equated with principals' work. Servant Leadership Theory was a framework for this study. However, findings reveal a connection of servant leadership to transformative learning experiences in mentorship. This phenomenological study of four principals led to three main themes relating to influential mentoring relationships: Mentoring in Place and Space, Trusting Relationships, and Guiding Mentorship. The discussion focuses on the implication of these themes in relation to the literature.

Mentoring in Place and Space

'Mentoring in Place and Space' emerged from mentorship in the context of shared physical places and a conceptual place of understanding. Building informal relationships based on choice, connection, and need, created spaces for the deeper work of mentoring to transpire. Strong mentoring relationships with colleagues emphasizing shared leadership and improved teaching, learning, and caring are consistent with Fullan and Hargreaves (2000) and Crippen (2004). Principals described 'being seen' in these relationships as pivotal moments because they resulted in formal leadership aspirations. This relates to Brown's (2010) definition of connection. Creating places and spaces where mentorship relationships can form in K - 12 education settings is worthy of consideration and exploration. Teaching can be an isolating endeavor. The examples of positive, influential mentoring relationships revealed in this study may not be available to everyone without attention given to generating mentoring relationships in schools.

Influential mentoring relationships with colleagues and multiple mentorships are consistent with Daloz’s (1999) claim that mentors appear during transitions. Finding mentorship within collegial relationships links to the literature that suggests proximity, regular contact, and trusting relationships are hallmarks of strong mentorship (Bertrand et al., 2018). Participants in

this study placed greater importance on their informal mentors with whom they connected and chose to enter a mentoring relationship consistent with the findings of Parfitt (2017). Formal mentoring relationships were limited in depth and trust. This could be because there is less opportunity in formal mentorships for pairing based on choice and connection. These findings highlight the need for formal mentorship, coaching, and leadership preparation programs to find ways to offer the benefits of informal mentoring relationships. For example, trust and strength in formal mentoring relationships may increase when matching mentees and mentors on compatibility, proximity, and needs. Furthermore, when principals were in the role of mentor, they believed the process developed an understanding of their own leadership styles. Mentorship as developing leadership in both the mentee and mentor is consistent with Clayton's (2013) research. A strong beginning and an initial positive experience in a mentoring relationship allow mentorship's functions and benefits to evolve.

Personal and professional mentoring relationships may occur throughout one's life. The results of this study suggest principals recognized influential mentors through reflection and hindsight only once they were through the transition. Looking back at relationships that have been impactful and identifying them as mentorships connects to literature that suggests mentors can be anyone in our lives who shapes who we become and influence what we come to value and believe about our identity (Crippen & Wallin, 2008; Palmer, 1998). The finding that some teachers and principals are mentors without considering themselves mentors implies mentoring approaches may come more naturally to some. It also means that the functions and qualities of mentorship may strongly align with teaching and educational leadership. Training and practice can develop the practice of mentorship in teachers and leaders. In the K-12 education context, this warrants consideration and planning to make mentorship more widely available. It means

more than bringing strong mentors into schools and implies developing teachers and principals, already working in schools, into strong mentors. I see this being particularly valuable in schools with many early career teachers or schools implementing new ways of teaching and learning. The finding of mentorship in hindsight highlights the benefit of reflective activities for aspiring and new leaders to learn from mentors of their past, consistent with Carver (2016), who found participating in reflective activities in leadership programs was transformative.

Trusting Relationships

The theme of 'Trusting Relationships' included participants' beliefs that trust and support were necessary conditions for moving towards opportunities that provided challenge, risk, subsequent growth, and preparation for leadership roles. Trusting relationships were fundamental for mentorship, and participants valued mentors who believed in their abilities to engage in this challenging work. The finding that trust and trusting relationships are essential to mentoring relationships aligned with the literature (Bertrand et al., 2018; Parfitt, 2007; Scott, 2010; Zepeda, 2012). Participants believed these relationships were instrumental in learning *how to be* a principal and *how to be* the kind of leader they have become. Fullan and Hargreaves (2000) described these relationships of learning *how to be* as ones that improved teaching, learning, and caring. Learning *how to be* a leader in mentorship influenced principals' leader identity development. As described in Palmer (1998), it required principals to reflect on relationships to connect who they were as a person to who they were as a leader. Whereas Clayton et al. (2013) found learning 'how to be' was connected to mentees adapting to the expectations of their new leadership positions. Trusting relationships supported principals in learning *how to be* a principal and developing their identities.

The research findings highlight the qualities of strong mentorship and what is influential about mentoring relationships for principals. Vulnerability, openness, honesty, and competency were values principals believed to be intrinsic to trusting mentoring relationships. The results are consistent with Bertrand et al.'s (2018) description of values associated with trusting relationships. Participants suggested that trusting relationships built on choice, connection, and need were essential for beginning and moving forward with mentorship. Given this, it was not surprising that informal mentoring relationships were more influential than formal mentoring relationships because of the deeper connection between mentee and mentor. Consistent with Scott (2010), strong mentorship was described as linear and present in relationships where a mentor and mentee worked alongside one another. Formal mentorship did not always include deep and complete trust. However, trust was one facet of strength in the mentoring relationships of principals. Trusting mentoring relationships were the primary and necessary conditions for the mentor and mentee to work together to construct meaningful learning and development for the mentee.

Guiding Mentorship

The third key theme of this research study was *Guiding Mentorship*. Participants described their mentors as guides and the process of mentorship as guiding them along. These results may reflect how servant leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1977) appears in mentorship experiences. Principals experienced mentorship through the guidance of a mentor who embodied the characteristics of servant leadership suggested by Van Dierendonck (2011). Principals considered mentors who adopted a servant leadership approach to mentoring to be the most influential. The most compelling explanation for this finding is that principals believed servant leader mentorship guided them in their reinvention of themselves as educators and

transformation from a teacher to leader identity. *Guiding Mentorship* included participants speaking about the heart and mind of mentorship and leadership, what it is they value, feel, and believe to be true. This connects to Illeris's (2014) work on transformative learning theory and identity. Participants spoke of adopting humanist and guiding values, more than core values, shaped by their supportive relationships with mentors. Principals' influential mentors had three main functions: encouraging, enhancing, and empowering them to reach their full potential. These results suggest servant leadership can support leadership efficacy through a transformative relationship between mentor and mentee.

A servant leaders' belief in the intrinsic value of each individual is central to empowering mentees. According to Greenleaf (1998), empowerment includes: acknowledging, recognizing, believing in, and supporting the learning possibilities of those you serve. Mentoring in a servant leadership style led to believing in and encouraging mentees, demonstrating and humbly enhancing the mentees' skills, and empowering by building capacity and developing participants' belief in their ability to lead. The results contribute to a picture of what *good* mentorship looks like, addressing a gap in the literature suggested by Grissom & Harrington (2010). Chopin (2013) supports the positive impact of mentors believing in mentees. Regardless of mentorship function, the quality of the relationship contributes to higher self-efficacy amongst aspiring new leaders (Chopin, 2013).

Servant leadership is important in mentoring relationships because, by definition, the mentees' needs are the focus, and the mentor supports and empowers the mentee to grow in their abilities (Greenleaf, 1977). Mentoring in a servant leadership style has been effective at inspiring, developing, and preparing teachers to become principals who then lead and mentor others authentically in the style of servant leadership. In K-12 educational leadership, recruiting

mentors with a servant leadership style into formal mentorship and leadership preparation programs may better support transitioning teacher leaders to principals. In my view, *servant leadership* could replace the term *guiding mentorship*. A guiding mentor demonstrates living their values authentically in how they support and come alongside mentees. Servant leadership in mentorship is absent in the literature surveyed on this theory. Still, the results of this research show that it is present in mentoring relationships and begins to furnish this gap in servant leadership theory and mentorship research.

What came through in the results was a collection of humanist values that have guided principals in their leadership. While only one principal spoke of having a core value that guided their leadership, others spoke of multiple and diverse values visible in their work. Ethics, empathy, serving others, altruism, humility, and responsibility were values described by Wintermute (2019) as connecting with humanism. This new literature was included to support the finding of principals' humanist values. Principals spoke of values guiding their leadership, particularly when engaging in difficult decisions and conversations. They also referenced values when describing who they were as leaders and included more than core values when describing their identity. For some, their core values acted as umbrellas that encapsulated other values and beliefs which guided their leadership. Servant leadership theory does not speak to the connection of values and humanism to identity. It may be that the marriage of servant leadership and identity transformation is the essence of a strong and influential mentoring relationship.

This research suggests that modeling, observation, and reflection influence leader identity. Principals did not consider identity development to be a function of mentorship but rather an unintended benefit that emerged within the mentoring relationship. The transformational element of identity development is currently not reflected in the theory of

servant leadership. While some leadership programs focus on identity (Carver, 2016), identity in mentorship programs for early career teachers is less prevalent. Inclusion of identity work early in one's career opens opportunities when one better understands who they are and what they believe.

Values coding infers "the *heart and mind* of an individual or group's worldview as to what is important, perceived as true, maintained as opinion, and felt strongly" (Saldana, 2011, p. 105). The evidence suggests that each participant mentors and leads with values that guide them in this work. Participants have been collecting values along the way, from early life experiences, throughout their journeys as teachers, and into leadership. While diverse and various values emerged in the interviews with participants, common to all was a collection of guiding values focused on care for the people they support in mentorship and leadership. Interestingly, the most important values to participants were those influential mentors and leaders demonstrated and instilled in them. This diversity of values amongst principals illuminates the diversity of identities needed and welcomed in K – 12 administration as leaders of learning communities.

Limitations

This research study had contributing factors that would impact generalizing the results. The limitations of this study were the small sample size and purposeful sampling of participants. This study was limited to four principals in one school district known to have experience with mentoring relationships. It is important to note that the results are not generalizable to mentoring relationships for non-principals and those working outside K-12 settings because of the small sample size and selection of participants who experienced this phenomenon.

A further limitation of this research study is that it took place in the time of COVID-19, a global pandemic that has long-reaching impacts on everyday life routines. Principals endured the

challenges and navigated the changes resulting from education in the time of a pandemic. This possibly influenced the participants of this study and the perceptions and experiences they thought to share at the time. Additionally, principals and vice-principals doing the work of leading in a pandemic had added pressure to their roles (Harris & Jones, 2020). Reflection of their practice and experiences during an extraordinary time may have altered their realities and influenced their perceptions of leading and mentoring. A possibility is that leading during a pandemic may have caused new or different values and components of their identities to emerge.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings in this study contribute to the literature surrounding mentorship, leadership, and identity development in K-12 education settings. The results are of importance as they offer insight into how to bring mentorship into school communities. It sheds light on the strength of informal mentoring relationships and how planning for elements of choice in formal mentorship programs could elevate relationship depth and subsequent influence on mentees. The findings add to the research qualities of *good* mentorship. A mentee who feels believed in, seen, and empowered is more likely to describe mentorship as powerful. These research findings speak to the relationship between mentorship and servant leadership, suggesting that mentoring based on the characteristics of a servant leader positively impacts educational leadership. Further, mentoring in a servant leadership style resulted in principals admiring and emulating the moral values of their mentors. This has implications for aspiring principals' leadership preparation. Mentoring experiences focused on developing skills of enhancing and empowering others may be valuable.

The theories of servant leadership and transformative learning are understood differently for K-12 school systems. Mentorship and leadership interconnect and work together in a way

that elaborates on the existing model of servant leadership to include the transformation of a mentee's identity as they prepare for leadership. How values, attitudes, and beliefs intersected in this study suggests mentorship acts as a vehicle for this transformation of identity and argues for involvement in mentorship as valuable preparation for leadership. This has implications for the work of mentors and enhancing functions of mentorship to support identity development.

The findings in this study raise a variety of intriguing questions for future research. There is more to learn about how mentors engage mentees in the work of identity development. What are the experiences of aspiring principals with Teacher Leader Academies or similar formal leadership preparation programs? Future studies may extend the current findings by examining particular initiatives focused on exploring identity, such as district book studies and collaborations with education consultants. Further questions emerged in this research, such as: How can schools provide informal mentorship and collective responsibility for the growth of all teachers?; How would principals who identify with other leadership styles view mentorship?; and How do principals view mentoring and coaching, and do they see mentoring as part of their role?

Recommendations:

- Developing and supporting mentoring communities within schools and making strong mentorship more readily available to all teachers.
- Focusing on mentor-mentee pairings in formal mentorship programs or teacher leader preparation programs to allow for self-selection of mentors and mentees.
- Explicitly leading teachers and principals through identity work as part of professional development and collaborative inquiry with colleagues.
- Promote and support mentoring as preparation for formal leadership.

- Enrich informal mentorship opportunities for teachers and principals to build relationships and learn from multiple colleagues.

Possibilities

I found there to be a diversity in leadership and that the principals in this study all lived their leadership experiences differently. I thought there would be more uniformity in leaders' values and how they appear in their leadership. Participants in this study have experienced multiple and influential mentoring relationships along their way to formal leadership and while leading school communities. Strong relationships were an essential component in mentorship and leadership for principals in this study. Without question, trust was the most valuable quality of a mentoring relationship. This study has widened the landscape of mentorship and leadership possibilities for me. It is clear to me that mentoring and leading are more similar than different, and I now know there is no one way to be an effective leader. I discovered that there are authentic and diverse leaders in learning communities, and there is room for strengths and identifying with a range of values. This research revealed to me that within servant leadership, there can be diversity in what leaders value. I have come to learn that the beautiful thing about guiding mentors and servant leaders is humility, the desire for enhancing the lives and experiences of others, and genuinely caring and believing in a mentee’s potential. If I were to move into a formal leadership role, I now more clearly see that who I am as a leader is a mentor. I would focus on my strengths that align with the qualities of servant leadership and my emerging leader identity to make visible my values as I work to serve and support. This study has transformed me into a teacher, mentor, and leader who thinks more critically and reflectively about my own mentoring relationships and emerging leader identity. This study has helped me more clearly see how trusting relationships and guiding mentorship can come together in schools

to create spaces that value community and authenticity, where leaders can stay true to who they are.

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Appendix A

Ethics Approval

Research, Engagement, & Graduate Studies
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Human Research Ethics Board - Certificate of Ethical Approval

HREB Protocol No: 100570
Principal Investigator: Mrs. Colleen Gregory
Team Members: Mrs. Colleen Gregory (Principal Investigator)
Dr. Mary Gene Saudelli (Supervisor)
Dr. Sheryl MacMath (Course Instructor)

Title: Mentoring Relationships and Identity Development in Elementary Principals
Department: Faculty of Professional Studies\Teacher Education

Effective: December 15, 2020
Expiry: December 14, 2021
The Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) has reviewed and approved the ethics of the above research. The HREB is constituted and operated in accordance with the requirements of the UFV Policy on Human Research Ethics and the current Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2).

The approval is subject to the following conditions:
1. Approval is granted only for the research and purposes described in the application.
2. Approval is for one year. A Request for Renewal must be submitted 2-3 weeks before the above expiry date.
3. Modifications to the approved research must be submitted as an Amendment to be reviewed and approved by the HREB before the changes can be implemented. If the changes are substantial, a new request for approval must be sought. *****An exception can be made where the change is necessary to eliminate an immediate risk to participant(s) (TPCS2 Article 6.15). Such changes may be implemented but must be reported to the HREB within 5 business days.
4. If an adverse incident occurs, an Adverse Incident Event form must be completed and submitted.
5. During the project period, the HREB must be notified of any issues that may have ethical implications.
***NEW** 6. A Final Report Event Form must be submitted to the HREB when the research is complete or terminated.
**Please submit your Research Continuity Plan to REGS@ufv.ca before beginning your research. The plan can be found here: https://www.ufv.ca/research/
UFV Human Research Ethics Board

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about a typical day or week as a principal? (What kinds of experiences or interactions typically occur in a day/week?)
2. What does mentorship mean to you?
3. Tell me about your experiences with mentoring relationships, formal or informal.
4. Which mentoring relationships were most influential in your preparation for leadership? What was it about these that were important or noteworthy?
5. Describe what you value as a principal. How has what you value emerged, changed, or remained constant since becoming a principal?
6. How would you describe your leader identity? (Who are you as a leader?)
7. How do you think your experiences with mentorship have shaped who you are as a leader?